

Research Article

Mysticism and Its Impact on Safavid Dynasty Architecture (Mosque of Sheikh Lotfollah in Isfahan)

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Abstract: The present study is an attempt to investigate the impact of mysticism on Safavid dynasty architecture. Moreover, the effect of mysticism on Mosque of Sheikh Lotfollah in Isfahan was explored which is recognized as one of the rarest and the biggest architectural manifestation of Safavid dynasty. It is a fact that architecture is inseparable from mysticism. This association between religions and the indigenous art is yet more apparent in Islam. So, it can be reasoned that mysticism lies in the essence of all religions. Since religion owns no instrument more effective and an exegete better than art especially architecture of temples and mosques to be introduced, as architecture found no stronger supporter than Islam. This issue becomes evident when Mosque of Sheikh Lotfollah of Isfahan architecture is taken into consideration. Accordingly, the present study aims through documentary and direct observation examines the significant of spiritual art and manifestation of mysticism in Safavid dynasty architecture in general and in Mosque of Sheikh Lotfollah, Isfahan in specific. Hence, the forgotten beauties would be reminded and the role of mysticism in directing art and artist to their divine destination is specified.

Keywords: Architecture, Isfahan, mosque of sheikh lotfollah, mysticism, Safavid dynasty

INTRODUCTION

Islam had a prominent role in evolution and expansion of many art forms in different eras specifically in Safavid Era. In Safavid period different forms of art including architecture, painting, calligraphy, illumination, carpet weaving, textiles and ceramics reached the peak of development which similar examples were less seen in past and future periods (Ayat Allahi, 2001).

The broad architectural activities in Safavid Era initiated in Shāh ‘Abbās the Great period. In this time not only in Isfahan but also in Shiraz, Mashhad, Tabriz and other Iranian cities various buildings were constructed (Panousi, 2003). The big assistant of Shāh ‘Abbās to operate such ambitious architecture project was Shaykh-i Bahā'i. He was a great scholar, philosopher, Quran commentator, faqih, astronomer, teacher, poet and engineer, the true essence of the Shāh ‘Abbās the Great period (Pope, 1994).

In fact, in Safavid dynasty the old Iranian architecture style was reviewed and in designing buildings shape and materials of buildings were highlighted. Most buildings in Safavid period like mosques, schools and caravanserais were constructed in a four-iwan plan. Also, applying mosaic and *haft rang* (seven colors) tiles found abundant prosperity for decorations.

In a way that the religious edifices of this period such as dome, iwan, arcades, entrance and even minarets were decorated with tiles. Tiles calligraphy became popular and different buildings were decorated with thuluth, naskh and nasta'liq styles as well (Pirnia, 1999).

Additionally, since mosques are the most prominent Islamic buildings, the Islamic art was born in mosques and so, they are the point architecture and Islamic art has been intersected (Pirnia, 1999).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE

If we define mysticism as intuitive perception of God and His Names, some Names like Al-Muawwir (The designer), Al-Khaleq (The creator), Al-Badī (The unattainable), Al-Bāri (The maker) and Al-Mubdi (The originator) bond to art, beauty, creativity and modernism. Thus, the Islamic architects attempted to construct different buildings and especially mosques so that reflect man's relationship with God in one hand and God relation with man on the other hand.

Beyond other forms of art, architecture is more leading to represent Excellence's motives, immortality, the joy of flying in the sky and greatness of the Other Worlds in human life and culture. Architecture in fact is in charge for objectifying visage and integrated

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illustration of an element spirit as well as man's idea and feelings about his status in life and his habitat. More than any artistic forms, architecture acclimates with humans' feelings, affection and soul.

So, to preserve and make divine and innate values immortal, man has always sought help from art, though not any art. Because some arts are raised from man's carnal desires and dominance, the mystic looks for an artistic form originates from spirituality and human nature.

Clearly, Islamic architecture is more echoed in mosques which manifest reinvention and replication of the Mother Nature conformity and peace that God dispenses as a permanent house of worship for Muslims. Also, research into history of religions tells us that religion is an integral part of any civilization and presence of temples is an evidence for the claim. Historically, temples had been located in the uppermost and most palpable part of the city. The great Aristotle, too, explains "the temple ought to be built where it could be seen from all sides and augments virtue and dominates over surroundings".

Although architecture flourished and reached a peak in Safavid Era, since Safavid kings concerned more to architecture, architecture was featured in religious buildings. Generally, in Safavid period few architectural innovations took place and only buildings decoration and arrangement encountered with creativity. Implementation of ceramics and using *haft rang* (seven colors) and mosaic tiles, mirror work, plasterwork etc., besides applying Arabesque patterns were some of these innovations.

In Safavid period no radical transformation was considered in overall building shape since the four-iwan building formed the whole construction of a building was originated from the Seljuq dynasty. However, because the four-iwan building involved heavy costs, only large cities welcomed this architectural style. Also, using colored tiles in the Safavids architecture was common in the late Seljuq dynasty and developed in the Safavid period.

But for what reason architecture considerably burgeoned in the Safavid period and contributed to the Safavids to stand as the most civilized dynasty in the Islamic world. Mir Hamid Madani in his book "Iranian society and pre-Islamic characteristics" stated that the Safavids during their 240 year reign played momentous roles in progress of Persian civilization and culture. This culminated in Abbas I reign when social, political, economic and spiritual lives of Iranian extensively flourished and became a proud of the world in the Safavid period (Panousi, 2003). And the repository of Persian cultural traditions and self-awareness of Iranian hood, acting as a bridge to modern Iran.

As a Shi'a empire, the Shi'a calligraphers reflected their Islamic decrees in inscriptions of mosques. This, according to Shayesteh Far contributed to propagation

of Shi'ism as one of the main branches of Islam. Thus, the Safavid period architecture greatly assisted in promotion of Shi'ism. Since when mosques are known as the best symbols of architecture but no role in expansion of Shi'ism and Islam, architecture sounds worthless.

Dr. Bemanian in his article naming "Piety and Architecture of Mosques" points.

In history, Muslims have always sought to along with commitment to Islamic rules and religiosity; adorn God's House as the most beautiful way as possible. Thus, during past 14 centuries a costly treasure of mosques has been remained. Doubtless, the architects of such mosques were filled with piety and benefited the old mosques from an original architectural identity.

Standing on the eastern side of the Naghsh-e Jahan Square, the Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque decorated with tiles and a grand arabesque pattern which its size and shape is a perfect fit with the dome. The mosque aisle leads to unparalleled shabistan and mihrab, having beautiful brick tilework with latticed stone windows. The interior tileworks of shabistan include *haft-rang* and mosaicworks. Mosaic inscriptions and turquoise tiles and latticed windows cover them. Various and orange and deep blue patterns and colors create a stunning glory and beauty for the shabistan.

Tilework in the interior ceiling of shabistan with rhombic design is stunning. Other masterpiece in the mosque is mosaic tilework and mogharn as work in the mihrab are among the most considerable artistic works.

An introduction on art and traditional architecture of mosques: Throughout history filled with lots of various events, in Iran after each fall a raise happened. In the interim, art was the chief attribute of any period and a gift to Iranian-Muslim artists to the world history.

Iranian traditional artistic works all around the world indicate that the Iranian have lived with deep taste and aestheticism. Loving beauty and learn from past periods were the main subjects for the traditional art. This manifests in tileworks, plasterworks, wooden decorations, mirror works, etchings and inlayworks.

Traditional arts in Iran firstly ties with concept of life and inspire from human experiences. Renewing Iranian traditional arts we see that most of Iranian-Islamic arts are much pragmatic and known as synthetic arts. In traditional artists' views there is least possible difference between pure fine arts and traditional arts. In this regard, traditional arts took both practical and aesthesim aspects of art.

Here, a brief description of Islamic art is provided. Figure 1 Show Sheikh Lotfollah mosque.

Islamic art is the Divine Art delivers the God's message. Therefore, preserving supreme values, purpose of life, God's relation with man, giving meaning to life against nihilism and aesthesim are of functions of Islamic art. The Islamic art goes beyond



Fig. 1: Sheikh Lotfollah mosque, Isfahan

any time and place; it is rooted in the world of abstraction and manifests itself in the physical world. However, the Islamic art is not detached from world of realities. The Islamic world in the contemporary world possesses valuable functions man needs them.

Mirroring ugliness and perversity and awakening of the communality besides making humans learn to move in the correct path and achieve salvation and perfection, help man to augment culture and awareness, learn generosity, self-sacrifice, forgiveness, equality and justice all could be sensed as the Islamic art is employed.

All artists who demonstrate art the way they understand, in spite of whole differences in the forms of principles, struggle to defend the true and eternal art. This language is interpreted as religious art. Therefore, being careless about religion the artist could not intensify his view and moves from form to hidden deep. Accordingly, an Iranian artist involves in building a mosque must leave formal beauty behind and manifests true beauty in his art.

Similarly, the art in some historical mosques in Iran and the world, testifies that the reason for attraction of these religious spots depends highly upon magnificence of interior and exterior elements. As delivering any message needs its specific means so, various artistic forms are instruments to convey religious messages.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The mosque architecture in the Islamic art is specially honored. It is the representation of artists' thoughts and beliefs have sacrificed their lives to accomplish unity and conformity. The Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque is one of the masterpieces of the Safavid dynasty was established by Mohammad Reza Isfahani ordered by Abbas I in the Naghsh-i Jahan Square. This building is important because of its excellent architecture and tileworks full of aesthesim. The precise geometry when it was constructed signifies it is implemented with such a deep and divine faith. Analyzing the geometrical design of the mosque, illustrates certain effective ideological elements.

Building: The interior side is all mosaic tileworks. The Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque is one of the great masterpieces of Isfahan in the eastern part of the

Naghsh-i Jahan Square and in front of Ālī Qāpū palace. A number of mosaic tileworks inside and outside the dome and the thulth inscriptions are designed by Alireza Tabrizi Abbasi. The architecture of the mosque is unusual because it has no minarets, no entrance shabistan (courtyard) and entrance is stairled. Having no shabistan and entrance courtyard is because of preserving symmetrical architecture with the Naghsh-i Jahan Square (located opposite to Ālī Qāpū palace) no courtyard is designed to the Mecca.

Its mosaic façade was built in 1011 Hejra and all decorations were finished in 1028 hejra. Alireza Abbasi patterned the façade inscriptions with thulth inscriptions in 1012 hejra. The architect was Mohammad Reza Isfahani his name is mentioned inside the mihran within two small tablets. The inscriptions inside the mosque are made by an unknown artist Bagher Banna that is as beautiful as Alireza Abbasi inscriptions. Inside and outside the dome are covered also by mosaic tileworks. The other architectural masterpiece here is employing the natural light and shiny colors.

But who was Sheikh Lotfollah? He was one of the outstanding Shi'ia scholars were born in Lebanon and Abbas I invited him to Isfahan. To honor him, Abbas I granted the mosque for the Sheikh teachings and praying. Since then the mosque was named Sheikh Lotfollah. The mosque architecture follows the Isfahani style (Pirnia, 2004). The mosque entrance is backed from the eastern side of the square. Passing the Chahar-pele (four stairs) the façade is observed.

The lower side of this area whole covered with yellow marbles. The lateral big platforms are the same. The entrance door is doubled and made of a big piece of sycamore. After 400 years it is still excellent. Before the mosque there is an eight angle pool were destroyed in years 1934-1936. In this time the dome house was covered with plaster and the wooden windows throw light the basement (Shahbazi Shiran, 2010).

The building direction toward qibla: One of the amazing characteristics of the mosque is its 45 degree north-south orientation is called *pāshnah*. The reason to this is that in Iranian-Islamic architecture mosques were designed in a way that when visitors came to Isfahan the mosque gateway was directed to the eastern side of the square. If it was intended to construct the mosque in such way, navigating qibla was difficult. The problem was solved as a gateway was rotated from the mosque entrance to left then to right.

So, although the mosque is in eastern side and from outside it is observed from north-south, in the mihrab a wall is installed to qibla. From outside the mosque building is not orientated, but when entered the interior space is oriented and because the dome is short is not in opposite angle (Honar Far, 1997).

Mihrab: Other grand masterpiece of the Sheikh Lotfollah mosque is the mihrab. Here, lots of mosaic

tileworks and mogharnas patterns decorate the mihrab. On two tablets of the interior side of the mihrab are written "a work by Mohammad Reza Ibn Hussein Banna Isfahan". Some other inscriptions are seen around the mihrab by Alireza Abbasi calligraphy narrate the Prophet and Imam Sadegh. Also, a few poems are inscribed are attributed to "Sheikh Bahai". Bagher Banna is the calligrapher. Thanks to its clear color and a harmony between patterns and lines, the mihrab design is eye catching. A raked arch forms the mihrab over it the elegant arabesques patterns decorate it (Shahbazi Shiran, 2010).

The short dome is designed with arabesques patterns with a color of earth; manifest a unique harmony in patterns, design and color.

Methods: The present research purpose firstly is to explore the effect of mysticism on the Safavid dynasty mysticism and secondly to investigate this impact on construction of the Sheikh Lotfollah mosque in Isfahan. To do so, the interpretational-historical method was used. The effect of mysticism on the Safavid dynasty architecture is the independent variable and the Sheikh Lotfollah mosque is the dependent variable. For the data collection, either documentary or field procedures were applied.

The theoretical framework assumes that the Safavid dynasty architecture encountered with significant transformations and such changes are evident in construction of mosques. Moreover, the mystical thoughts were effective as well.

RESULTS

The effect of patterns, light and color on mystical atmosphere of the mosque: Three elements of pattern, light and color directly involve in creation of the mystical atmosphere in the mosque. Pattern, too is an integral part of the building materials. The way bricks are placed creates a pattern. The brick and mortars combination generates a pattern. Color as the second element can't independently appear unless it covers the pattern and becomes engaged in creation of a mystical atmosphere. The third element, thus is light which highlights the color and pattern together and complete the atmosphere. So, the depth and breadth of the field of vision is born (Mousavi, 2005).

Pattern: Diverse patterns and colorful tileworks of Iranian mosques are among the most excellent and meaningful elements of architecture. These patterns function based on their shape and location and carry a different concept. Duplication is the one and only element is employed in mosques and directly associates with Islamic spirit and worship. Islamic patterns which tie with arabesques and geometrical patterns are made of one or more regular shapes placed in curves and circles and based on repeated measures are manifested

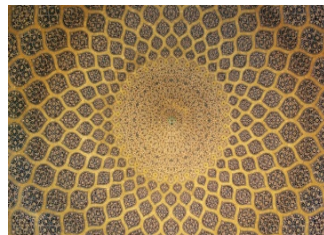


Fig. 2: Regular patterns beneath the dome

with different shapes. Hence, proportions pertain to the pattern will duplicate all on the surface.

Even if the geometrical basis of the pattern removes and only patterns remain, the duplication is still tangible. These patterns are in complete harmony with the mosque architecture and convey the sense of spirituality and whole particles invite the prayer to meditate over the Heaven. The patterns which their geometrical order illustrates its rationality in addition to creation of a facial beauty plays a second role for the prayer and detaches him from the earthy world to the Heaven. Figure 2 show regular patterns beneath the dome.

In most of the Islamic patterns, scripts significantly matters. The naskh and kufic calligraphy two grand means of inscription of the Holy verses. The Muslim artist goes beyond plurality to unity. Selection of geometrical and arabesque patterns and least possible use of human patterns as well as unity of whole patterns in just one point is a further emphasis to spirituality. All geometrical patterns that clearly show plurality in spite of unity and vice versa along with the arabesque patterns inspire a plant shape go so far from the nature so that create a spiritual atmosphere refers to the Heaven.

Like other spiritual thinking in mosques architecture, the spiritual thinking is perfectly expressed. Mosques architecture and decoration of dome, minarates, ground, inscriptions and mogharn as works create such an atmosphere connect man to the Goodness. Actually, in the traditional architecture, the geometrical figures are more than a technical instrument, though they act in this way in architecture. But, above this materialistic function it has a more important function which is reminding man through a symbolic figure. In the traditional architecture nothing is meaningless and meaning is nothing but the spiritual state. Figure 3 show regular shapes in designing ceilings and walls

Dome: In Islamic architecture dome has been always symbolized the sky standing on a cube symbolizes earth. Such placement is displayed so beautifully that mogharnases and squinches of interface ring of sky and earth is clearly observable.

The circle shape of dome is an analogy of the genesis after divisions various shapes will be created.

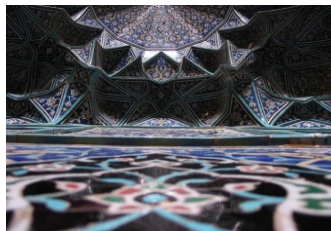


Fig. 3: Regular shapes in designing ceilings and walls

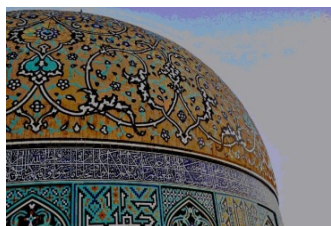


Fig. 4: The dome of Sheikh Lotfollah mosque



Fig. 5: Combination of different colors for manifestation of spirituality

On top of the dome of most Iranian mosques the Grand of Name Allah is seen.

Figure 4 show the dome of Sheikh Lotfollah mosque.

Mihrab: In Iranian mosques mihrab lots of various colorings have been used which represents God's attributes. This however is an absent element in Christian mihrans colored only with white-gray continuum. Doubtless, the mosques mihrab is one of original representations of Islamic art has interwoven with Islamic worship. Furthermore, the word Harb (Islamic war) connotes mihrab since mihrab is the place for symbolic fighting with carnal desires.

Script: As Quran says "language and script" are God's gifts to man so that he knows God. In other word this is Allah's knowledge and Allah's names initiate expression.

Any calligraphy artist when playing with forms, dimensions and proportions of letters, especially highlights some God's attributes. For example, glory, violence and excellence are represented through vertical lines especially the alef line (letter A) which is the key to unity of the Heaven.

Color: Certainly colors are outstanding in Islamic architecture and convey a broad range of meanings. So, one next element to create a mystical atmosphere in mosques is coloring. In addition to various mystical effects are mentally influential and could cause a sense of happiness or sadness. In man's mind, colors make a qualitative and symbolic state.

Harmony of colors along with light all plays a determining role in Iranian-Islamic arts. In Iranian-Islamic art, colors have been employed. That is, the meaning any color conveys and a total reaction a color may elicit in human's psyche are deeply understood. In fact, traditional usage of color aiming more to remind heavenly realities of anything. In this sense, colors are one element their symbolic meaning needs to be taken into account. Through this, therefore the inner meaning of Islamic architecture and art could be realized.

Hussein Nasr in his book "Iran the bridge of turquoise" states about the impact of color as: colors in art are a kimia and mixturing them together is similar to alchemy. Each color has a symbolic meaning as any color connects to one of inner sentiments of man and soul. Whole Islamic mosques in the world similarly follow a specific principle for employing colors which, green, turquoise blue and blue are the most prevalent colors. The azure and turquoise blue are of the main colors used for painting walls, tiles, mihrab, dome, courtyard and shabistan (Kiani, 2004).

The azure and turquoise blue are exclusive colors of the early morning; however, a continuum of blue and green represent the sky, infinity, eternity, power and expansion.

Figure 5 show combination of different colors for manifestation of spirituality.

Light: Islamic architecture puts a special emphasis on light specifically in Iran. Inside the mosque is like a light is manifested materially and implies the verse Noor. In Iran, due to intense sun light in most parts of Iran and a clear weather in high lands, need for light and clear atmosphere have been a part of Iranians' life during the history. Light is the prominent element of Iranian architecture not as a physical element. It is a symbol of wisdom and existence. Light is a spiritual presence penetrates within the object and makes it beautiful. This place then becomes a place for man's soul where his nature is rooted.

The role of light in Islamic architecture greatly emphasizes on the concept of expression. Light is responsible for making the building transparent and lessen darkness. Light as the symbol of existence is one of elements in the spiritual atmosphere. The lighting systems in mosques in addition to function as a spiritual symbol are a part of the mosque decoration. This lighting properly acts to send information. light can gives life to Islamic decorations. Combination of light and water is one of the oldest pairs in mosque architecture. Water is the symbol of cleaning and mental purification in the mosque. The combination of water with light symbolizes fertility and growth.

Mixing water and light, brings beauty and fertility both to the mosque.

Light and decorations of the mosque, creates a dreamy world and guide the prayer toward the Heaven. Since Islamic art and architecture tie with the Heaven, display the element of light as an analogy of the Absolute Existence. So, in this regard light is responsible for element of existence in the mosque.

The volume of space in lighting of Iranian-Islamic architecture is important. In this space and asynchronous coverage create a reflection of light on the surface with the same colors and color spectrums with different shades. Thus, give a special shine to the environment could be seen from different angles. Lighting in the shabistan is designed in a way that considerably assists to making a contrast in human's perspective.

Source of light: According to the points above about the effect of light on man's soul, some scientific characteristics and mechanisms of lighting the interior side mosque are provided here.

Light in the mosques usually requires two sources. The first is for lighting the whole area of the shabistan performed through a large cut on the shabistan wall and is used to throw light on the mihrab. The second, however is the main source of the shabistan light. This is the direct sun light penetrates through windows inside the shabistan. Thus, the light sources in the Sheikh Lotfollah mosque shabistan is supplied with these two sources (Grobe, 2000).

Fundamentally, the architecture of such mosques is the architecture of light, clarity and spirituality where, many visitors have impressed by the interior space of this place. Here, three sources of light could be seen. One is the light reflected through the large northeast entrance on the walls of southwest shabistan, where the mihrab is located and brightens the surface of tileworks. Two is the light enters via the wooden grid installed on eastern wall of the gonbad khaneh (dome house) and brightens the center of the gonbad khaneh (dome house). Three, is the grids beneath the dome where walls connect to the dome and brightens the space under the dome and draws a beautiful image of peacock's tail beneath the dome.

Figure 6 show entrance of light from the large northeast gateway. Figure 7 show entrance of light from windows into the shabistan and Fig. 8 show entrance of color from grids beneath the dome at the junction of walls.

Everything is in perfect order, measures are appropriate, patterns are absolutely beautiful and all aesthetical elements besides a mysterious silence create a truly spiritual space.

Patterns and colors of tileworks on the dome are of the most elegant tileworks available in Iran. The interior light is supplied through grids below on the stem of the dome. The sun reflection in addition to brightening the mosque displays the mystical atmosphere in the building. The lower part of the dome

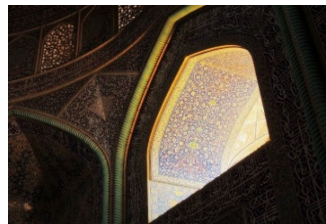


Fig. 6: Entrance of light from the large northeast gateway

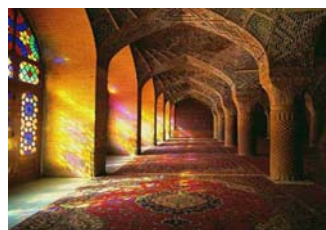


Fig. 7: Entrance of light from windows into the shabistan

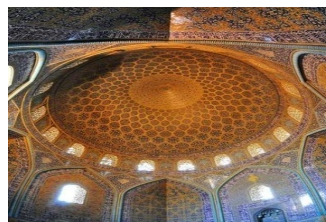


Fig. 8: Entrance of color from grids beneath the dome at the junction of walls

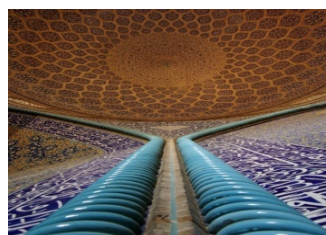


Fig. 9: Tile works decoration of Quranic chapters

is decorated with blue tileworks, flower patterns and mosaic tiles designed with some Quranic verses.

Figure 9 show tileworks decoration of Quranic chapters.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, it could be concluded that art in Islamic culture and the effect of mystical concepts on the Islamic architecture especially mosques architecture has a position beyond the formal beauty. However, beautiful representing of artistic works is one of important artistic elements. A superior position, but can be attributed to art. To mention one of the greatest architectural artists are the Safavids artists. In this period, architecture developed to its peak and the

mosques architecture under the influence of mysticism is one of such manifestation. The Shikh Lotfollah mosque is the construction conveys spirituality with the most paramount state.

Each single pattern is not only a color and shape, it has specific meaning can be understood based on spiritual experience any individual has. Any pattern in the Islamic art is seeing what is unseen. Certainly, the main audience of Islamic art I thoughtful and is able to decode symbols to reach the meaning. Otherwise, watching Islamic art sounds useless. In this regard, some studies on different cultural aspects of Islamic art will also contain many concepts of Islamic art.

As a matter of fact, Iranian-Islamic architects have always sought to create an atmosphere where the concept of being transient of material things is highlighted. But if things were absolutely unreal and nothing, then that thing did not exist and so no subject for the Islamic art. Accordingly, we conclude that the traditional architectures through constructing various constructions could illustrate the deep mystical concepts with art. To achieve this, Iranian-Islamic architecture was an instrument to blend mystical content and Islam and make the art eternal.

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